

A Beekeeper and His Bees

The hum of the buzzing gets louder as the man in the white polyester costume gets closer to the tattered boxes. In the boxes are hundreds of thousands of bees flying and crawling around, making honey and protecting their queen.

Smoke pours out of the tin can instrument and calms the bees. Chris Frink, President of Capital Area Beekeeper Association (CABA), is tending to his hives preparing for spring's honey yield.

“One thing that is not fun about bee keeping is having a bee crawl in your ear canal,” Frink said. “Or bees getting in your face net and stinging you on the nose.”

Frink has been in the bee business for six years. It all started when he and his wife, Emily Taylor, decided to raise their own chickens in 2009.

It was just months after they started raising chickens when a friend asked if they had thought about beekeeping. The friend told them that all the citrus plants they had in their backyard would be great for honeybee pollination.

Beekeeping was never a thought in their minds until that moment.

“Emily and I decided that we wanted to grow as much food as we could,” Frink said. “We wanted to know more about what we were putting into our bodies; there's no better way of doing that than growing your own food.”

After that day, Frink consulted with local beekeepers to see how to successfully become a part of the new business. He bought crates, bee smokers, and bee suits online and from local sellers.

Local beekeepers gave Frink honey bees to begin his new journey.

Shortly after he started beekeeping, Frink received calls from friends saying they had bee hives in their yard and house that they wanted to get rid of. Frink would then go and “capture” the hive and bring it back to the bee hives in his yard.

Most of the time, the transaction is successful. Every once in a while the new bees are not happy with their new hive and they will fly away.

“One of the most difficult parts of bee keeping is having no control over your bees,” Frink said. “They can fly away at any time. There’s no way to contain them.”

On top of the struggle of actually keeping the bees, there are many other aspects of beekeeping that can be challenging.

Parasites and mites can infest hives killing all the bees, leaving the beekeeper with nothing. This has been an unsolved issue for decades. Dr. Bob Danka is a Research Entomologist at the USDA research facility in Baton Rouge located off Ben Hur Road.

He and his team breed honey bees in hopes of modifying the genetics of the bee to make them resistant to deadly parasites and mites. Danka has been breeding honey bees for 30 years and is making headway.

“In the past 20 years we have made remarkable progress with breeding stronger, more resistant honey bees,” Danka said. “One thing people have to keep in mind is that breeding takes many years which is why progress is slow.”

Sharon O’Brien, a Biological Science Technician for USDA, says that honey bee breeding has come a long way compared to 30 years ago because of more advanced technology and education.

“Bee breeding is tedious but very rewarding,” O’Brien said. “Any progress is a huge accomplishment. There is still a lot of work to be done to make bees resilient to Varroa nationwide.”

There is a worldwide problem with parasites killing whole honeybee hives, especially in the United States. Danka received his graduate degree in South America where he studied the Varroa mite, the most prominent mite that kills African honey bees. African honey bees are the honey bees we have here in America that pollinate our crops.

“The African honey bees are in big trouble if we can’t breed resistant bees,” Danka said. “The mites are microscopic but are so powerful they can infect hives and kill the whole hive and their queen.”

According to entomologytoday.com, East African honey bees are resilient to the Varroa mite. However, honey bees in the United States, Europe, and Asia are widely affected by this mite.

Frink has not yet crossed paths with the Varroa mite but has had problems with other parasites in his hives. These parasites are black and visible to the human eye. If not dealt with, they can kill an entire hive.

“I put Swiffer sheets in the hives,” Frink said. “The parasites get caught in the fibers and die. The bees are too big to get caught in them.”

Despite the many challenges Frink faces in beekeeping, the positives are tremendous. Honey being the biggest of them all.

Each spring is honey harvesting season which means a lot of work for Frink and his wife. First, they harvest the honey combs from the hives. Then they put the combs in a large machine that

they rent or borrow from a farmer. The machine has to be propped up and is so massive it takes up all of their dining room table.

After the combs spin around in the machine for hours, honey drips out of the machine into buckets. The result is hundreds of gallons of honey (in a good year).

“At times beekeeping is very overwhelming,” Frink said. “But eating your own honey that you harvested, cared for, and was stung for is one of the best feelings.”

Frink sells the honey that they harvest. He also gives it away to friends at his church and brings dozens of bottles to local foodbanks in Baton Rouge. His wife recently began making candles and soap out of the left over wax from the honeycombs.

“I will never regret getting involved with bees,” Frink said. “It has taught me lessons beyond beekeeping and is one of the most rewarding experiences.”